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Raising the Profile, Filling the Gaps

*Report from a Town Hall Meeting
on the Future of Code Officials*



National Institute of
BUILDING SCIENCES



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Code professionals—and the building industry at large—have sensed the impending crisis in the future availability of a code professional workforce. That sense was confirmed by a survey of nearly 4,000 code professionals conducted by the National Institute of Building Sciences (Institute) on behalf of the International Code Council (ICC) from March to May 2014. Eighty percent of the existing workforce of code professionals is expected to retire in the next 15 years, with 30 percent expecting to do so in the next five years.¹

Following the survey results, the Institute and ICC conducted a Town Hall Meeting on the Future of Code Officials on September 30, 2014 during the ICC Annual Conference. The Town Hall Meeting brought together more than 100 code officials and other stakeholders to discuss the survey results and identify opportunities to avert the potential crisis. ICC President Stephen Jones began the meeting with an introductory keynote, Institute Presidential Advisor Ryan Colker provided a summary of the survey results and Institute President Henry Green moderated the town hall-style discussion.

CURRENT RECRUITING AND OUTREACH PRACTICES VARY

Town Hall participants cited a variety of mechanisms currently used within their communities to build awareness of their work and attract new entrants into the profession. Despite the call to “Raise the Profile” of code officials, some participants felt that the desire to stay “under the radar” still remained prevalent within the code profession.² This looming crisis should be the trigger to finally overcome this tendency.

Many code departments have undertaken efforts to become more prominent in their communities. Code officials can serve as their own “public relations machine” because they have a local presence and intimate knowledge of the benefits they provide. However, tools and resources to take advantage of this opportunity are needed, including data and messaging on the role of code departments in economic development; a “Faces of Code Officials” campaign outlining their roles in communities and benefits to society; and materials that highlight the code profession (particularly targeted at Millennials³). ICC chapters can help spread common messages within a geographic area and develop organized mentorship or outreach programs. Having a booth at community events can help increase exposure and demystify the work of the department.



¹ For a complete summary of survey results, see *The Future of Code Officials: Results and Recommendations from a Demographic Survey*, <http://www.nibs.org/resource/resmgr/ncgbc/future-of-code-officials.pdf>.

² The desire to “Raise the Profile” of code professionals was the presidential theme of 2006–2007 ICC Past President Wally Bailey.

³ Millennials are the demographic cohort following Generation X with birth years ranging from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.

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Town Hall participants saw engagement with local high school and community college programs as particularly beneficial. Therefore, code officials should take every opportunity to participate in activities focused on high school students, including career/professional days, mentoring and internships. Technical high schools, in particular, can offer opportunities. Code professionals are encouraged to serve on advisory boards and support integration of code-related activities into the high school curriculum. At a local and national level, links with educational organizations can help drive recognition of the profession and opportunities to introduce related activities in the classroom. Local media should be invited to cover all classroom-related activities.

Community colleges can serve as an important venue for attracting early career code professionals, but this also requires outreach and engagement. Again, participation on advisory boards can help drive incorporation of code-related curriculum and create exposure for the profession. ICC chapters can offer scholarships and organize internships and ride-alongs to drive interest.

For long-term recruitment avenues and trickle down impacts to parents, activities for elementary school children also must be deployed. Toys, books and games based on code official-related tasks can help children envision a future career in code administration. A merit badge based on code administration for Boy and Girl Scouts can help illuminate the opportunity for code-related careers.

Since the profession has a long history of attracting members from the trades, an increased focus on tradespeople may be warranted. However, some participants expressed a concern with the notion that experience in the trades is required—if the profession is to be seen as a career path and respected profession on its own then it needs its own educational entry points and body of knowledge.⁴ Further, participants felt that the job of today’s code professional is more focused on the interactions with building industry stakeholders and customer service than about the actual code or construction (approximately 75% about interaction and 25% about code). That concern notwithstanding, code seminars or “tailgate talks” with tradespeople at the jobsite can serve the dual purpose of increasing understanding of code requirements and providing exposure to possible careers as code professionals.

TELLING THE STORY

Building support for the code profession and attracting new entrants relies on the development and dissemination of effective communications that highlight the important role code professionals play in community health, safety and welfare.

The current generation of 20 to 30 year olds poised to enter the workforce (Millennials) has been characterized as a generation that is looking to make a difference, wants to work in exciting environments rather than being tied to a desk, and utilizes the latest technology. A code-related career can fill these requirements, but the compelling story and implementation of technology is necessary.

⁴ One participant indicated that Florida requires code officials to obtain a state license, which requires five years in a trade (or a four-year degree plus one year in the field).

Code professionals pride themselves on the role they play in assuring the health, safety and welfare of the communities they serve. Utilizing some of the methods identified above, code professionals should highlight the contributions they make to hazard preparedness, public safety, sustainability and economic development. The uniqueness of each project and the conduct of field inspections were cited as important messages to Millennials. While governments in general, and code departments in particular, are slow to implement new technology, a shift is necessary to attract recent graduates. The opportunity to implement technology is discussed in greater depth below.

In addition to Millennials, the profession needs to build a greater understanding with other government officials—particularly those who make decisions on budgets, hiring and technology investments. This will both serve to build respect for the profession and enhance the capacity of code departments. To support this enhanced understanding, code professionals themselves need to interact effectively with policymakers in their communities. They must learn how to move beyond the technical nature of their work and explain the overall value (typically in the form of money or time) they provide to the community. Again, case studies and materials specifically focused on the economic development benefits of effective code departments are needed.

Highlighting the role code departments play in public safety is required. Establishing specific ties with parallel departments in the community, including police and fire, can be beneficial.⁵ Consistent messaging tied to important government initiatives, including resilience and sustainability, can help drive support. Creating linkages with government-related associations, including the Conference of Mayors and National League of Cities, will be beneficial.

The ongoing focus on the importance of code departments for public safety and economic development can help counter the trend within government to cut code departments below minimum levels of effectiveness. While not discussed in-depth at the Town Hall, the potential role for third-party inspection services was identified as an area in need of additional study and discussion.

With the lack of knowledge about the profession abounding both in government and potential entrants into the profession, the need to develop courses, webinars and materials focused at the public and government officials is necessary to help fill this gap. ICC should conduct a course introducing the profession—open to the public—at each ICC conference (and potentially at regional-level conferences as well). The course should focus especially on high school students and their parents. Partners with a presence in the community where conferences are being held can help support outreach to public audiences. A webinar or video version for on-demand viewing also should be developed.

⁵ One participant indicated that his community established a joint public safety academy that brought together police, fire and building departments.

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ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

While it will be crucial to attract the next generation of the code professional workforce, the Town Hall participants identified several challenges facing the current profession that also need to be addressed. While overall salaries for code professionals can be low in some communities, the stability and benefits associated with a government job have been important factors. However, the overall benefit of government employment is shifting. Raises are less frequent (if given at all), and benefits are being cut, all while student loans and other ongoing household expenses are rising.

Participants also cited the need for the personnel make up of code departments to reflect the make up of the community they serve. This includes increasing diversity and salary level. This will help increase respect for the profession and build awareness within the community.

There tends to be a lack of code professional representation in political and governmental discussions. Several participants identified this lack of representation as a hindrance to effective messaging and communication. Professionals with similar functions in government, including police, fire and public works, tend to have strong representation. Increased representation in the political and governmental arena would serve to promote protection of departments from detrimental action by government officials.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

While many of the Town Hall participants recognized the dire situation facing the profession, they also were quite optimistic. They recognized that the profession has lacked particular focus on qualifications and the introduction of technology has been slow. The pending turnover of a significant number of code professionals provides a window of opportunity to overcome these potential shortcomings.

As indicated above, Millennials are looking for careers that make use of technology to assist their job functions. While not addressed in the demographic survey, Town Hall participants readily confessed that code departments and code professionals have been slow to adopt new technology—technology that could help increase efficiency, customer service and improve outcomes. Centralized plan review via the internet was cited as one particular opportunity to advance efficiency.

To advance the profession and attract new participants, the utilization of technology must be advanced. In many departments, the implementation of new technology is usually focused on personnel with greater seniority—often those personnel least likely to need the technology given their managerial roles and least likely to embrace its use. With limited budgets, technology improvements should be focused at the levels of personnel who can most effectively take advantage of its benefits. If departments can tie technology upgrades to existing government initiatives, including paperless, digital access or sustainability, their chance of funding can increase.

In addition to opportunities to improve technology use within the profession, Town Hall participants also saw an opportunity to refocus on the qualifications required to be a code professional. As identified above, the trades may no longer be the preferred pathway into the profession. The skills required to be an effective code official are increasingly shifting to customer service, critical thinking and public administration, and away from the technical skills picked up as a tradesperson. Participants felt that while technical skills and code content can be taught on the job, the newer skills require a different type of personality than those currently represented in the trades.

This desire to shift the qualifications of an effective code official also parallels the needed shift to the public face of the profession. With increased focus on public safety and economic development support, code professionals must be comfortable being out in the community as a representative of government.

While the changing demographics open these windows of opportunity, the current cadre of code professionals and their related organizations must advocate for the changes necessary to take advantage of these opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the aging of the existing code professional workforce and pending retirements, there is a need for immediate action. This pending crisis offers significant opportunities to advance the code profession while addressing immediate needs. Raising the profile and building respect for the profession within communities and the halls of government can provide the visibility necessary to attract the next generation of code professionals. Technology improvements and a greater focus on the qualifications for today's code professionals will be key.

Much of the responsibility falls to individual code professionals who are on the ground every day, serving their communities. Extending that service to include engagement with students, teachers and guidance counselors—from elementary to high school and community colleges—can help support development of a pipeline of new code professionals and build respect for the profession. Increased visibility within the community can be equally valuable. Engagement with government officials to share the value code departments and professionals provide to communities is essential.

While individual code professionals bear the burden of enhancing their image, organizations like ICC can provide important tools, including outreach materials, messaging development, educational tools, case studies and other resources to support a common and effective approach.

The following recommendations are based on the results of the demographic survey and the Town Hall meeting:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Code departments, ICC Chapters and individual code professionals should take every opportunity to gain exposure in their communities. This includes participating at community-wide events, programs in the classroom, internship and mentoring programs, and engaging with other government officials.
- ICC and the Institute should conduct the demographic survey on a regular basis to monitor progress. The survey also should be expanded to incorporate issues of diversity, trends within departments and technology implementation.
- ICC should develop materials supporting dissemination of a common message about the profession, including the role of code officials within their communities, their impacts on economic development, case studies and career development plans.
- ICC should support advances in technology that facilitate code administration, provide education and training, and identify best practices. In particular, ICC should provide cloud-based access to codes and related documents to support additional technology advances.
- ICC should develop a program, including webinars and live presentations, to introduce code professionals to their communities. These presentations should be given at all ICC meetings and be open to the community. Community partners at the meeting site can help reach out to members of the public.
- ICC should develop a course for code officials on how to engage with local government representatives.

